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Suggested Reference

Rossiter, H. L. (2016). She's Always a Woman: Butch Lesbian Trans Women in the Lesbian Community. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 20(1), 87-96.
doi: [10.1080/10894160.2015.1076236](https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.1076236)

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Journal of Lesbian Studies* on 23 Dec 2015, available online:

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She's Always a Woman: Butch Lesbian Trans Women in the Lesbian Community

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Abstract

While the visibility and acceptance of trans women have grown globally in recent years, this progress has primarily been within a traditional, heteronormative narrative. But a growing number of trans women identify as butch lesbians and challenge this heteronormative narrative. The existence of butch trans women has created a debate on where they fit within queer and lesbian communities and how their gender performance fits within traditional butch/femme understandings of lesbian or queer relationships. This article seeks to explore the intersections of gender identity and sexual orientation that butch trans women experience when they engage with lesbian and trans communities.

Keywords: butch trans women, gender diversity, doing gender, transgender

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Introduction

The last few years have seen a significant rise in the visibility of trans women such as Carmen Carrera, Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner, and Janet Mock, who are all conventionally physically attractive and very feminine. The visibility of this one group of trans women reinforces the social script that all trans women should aspire to be hyper-feminine. A number of trans women identify as butch lesbians, however, and do not fit within this feminine narrative. With gender being a dominant social force, this raises the question of how butch trans women experience their gender.

Gender marks and classifies all people socially and individually. While it is perceived by the wider social world as a natural state, gender is also regarded by social constructionist-oriented theorists and researchers as the result of our everyday actions. Because gender minorities often challenge many gender norms, an examination of their lives can offer valuable insights into how these norms operate. Butch trans women fall within the male-to-female trans spectrum and, like butch lesbians, “have more masculine traits,” but “do not necessarily adopt masculine behaviours and attitudes in all social contexts” (Walker, et al 2012, p. 91-92). We can see how their gender is socially constructed and regulated by examining their gender performance through the lens of West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “Doing Gender.”

For almost thirty years, “Doing Gender” has provided the theoretical base for critical examinations of the ways that people enact gender in their lives. West and Zimmerman outlined an approach that uses “an ethnomethodologically informed ... understanding of gender,” which sees gender “as a routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment” (1987, p. 126). In conceptualizing gender as being “constituted through interaction,” West and Zimmerman explored the interrelated concepts of sex, sex category, and gender (1987, p. 129). Sex is the “application of socially agreed upon biological criteria,” such as having

either a vagina or a penis; sex category is the application of sex criteria “in everyday life” based upon “socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one’s membership in one or the other category”; and gender is the social activity of “managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (1987, p. 127).

A trans woman inhabits a number of different social positions that are variously described as a medical/psychiatric condition (Coleman et al 2012), an identity (Valentine 2006), a growing social movement (Broad 2002), and a community (Gagne, McGaughey, & Tewksbury 1997). Despite this diversity of positioning, the dominant narratives in the wider social world, as well as within academia and the media, primarily focus on how trans women meet traditional feminine gender norms and conform to heterosexual gender relations (Denny 2006; Eisner 2013; Stryker 2008). The power of gender norms is such that trans women are placed into the contradictory position of being perceived as both challenging heterosexual and cisgender social norms around gender performance and as reinforcing the gender binary (Connell 2010). This latter belief is reflected in the argument that trans people, by their very act of transition, are “dupes of gender” (Hausman 1995, p. 140). The existence of butch trans women undermines the validity of these narratives. The goal of this article is to examine the gender performance of butch trans women, as well as their reception in both trans and cis lesbian communities.

Gender Performance of Butch Trans Women

The prevailing attitude about binary trans people is that they “will always transition toward normative genders.” (MacDonald 2013, p. 136). Therefore it is assumed that trans women will look and act like feminine, cisgender heterosexual women and adhere to a hyper-feminine social script (Hardie 2006; Hill-Meyer 2011a; Serano 2007). Even in

transgender support groups, the discussion often focuses on the success or failure of their trans female members to meet these expectations (Davy 2011; Roen 2002).

Butch trans women, by their very existence, fall outside the norms of gender performance associated with trans women. As a result, they are subject to “frequent objectification cues” (Yavorsky and Sayer 2013, p. 512) and are often perceived as an “oxymoron” and as “failures” as women (Hill-Meyer 2008). The question among many trans and cis people alike is why a butch trans woman would decide to transition if she was not going to try to pass as cisgender and seek to be a “real” woman (Lee 2009).

Ansara and Hegarty (2011) showed that cisgenderism is “a prejudicial *ideology*” held by medical professionals, who, by insisting on alignment between sexed bodies, gender performance, and sexuality, reinforce “authoritative cultural discourses” around appropriate gender performance for trans and gender diverse people (p. 141). In my case, as a butch trans woman, I was told by a medical professional to appear more feminine by my next appointment if I wanted to continue my transition; the only thing I felt I could do was to pierce my ears. By expecting adherence to a feminine gender presentation, medical professionals force their ideas of what it means to be a woman onto all trans women.

Butch trans women, by presenting as butch, develop their own interpretation of what it means to be a woman and are not limited by traditional transgender narratives. Their gender performance is perhaps the most transgressive of trans gender performances. But, in some respects, the ways that the gender of butch trans women is perceived and recognized is also similar to the experiences of cisgender butch lesbians and femme trans men. All three groups challenge norms of masculinity by performing it in ways that are “generally received by hetero- and homo- normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment” (Halberstam 1998, p. 9).

West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that trans women both do and undo the hegemonic concepts of traditional gender performance through their interactions with the wider social world. Like other trans people, butch trans women are often framed as performing gender in a manner that “seems to principally consist in combining or parodying existing gender practices” (Hird 2002, p. 589). While cisgender people, especially cisgender women, are also criticized at times for their gender presentation, they are rarely maligned for adhering to gender norms or perpetuating a gender binary system. At the same time, butch trans women, as women, are subjected to narratives around being respectable women that render female masculinity (Halberstam 1998) unreadable. The idea of a butch trans woman is so inconceivable that they are often mistaken for pre-transition trans men (Hill-Meyer 2011c). This is a prime example of how cisgender notions of gender are undone by the gender performance of butch trans women.

Social narratives about trans and gender diverse people, especially media representations, show a preoccupation with surgery and adhering to normative gender performances. As Siebler (2010) notes, documentaries like *Transgeneration* (Simmons 2005) and feature films like *Transamerica* (Tucker 2005) portray trans people as holding onto the “belief that there is only one way to be in the world: a masculine male and a feminine female,” thus reinforcing the idea that they are “soldiers of the gender system” (pp. 323-324). The media’s focus on surgical and medical transition ignores the existence of trans people who identify as genderqueer, agender, gender fluid, or androgynous (Siebler 2010) and, in so doing, reinforces the gender binary and strengthens the trope that all trans people transition, and transition to a normative gender.

A butch trans women panel was part of Butch Voices, a 2011 conference in Oakland, California, that brought together cis and trans butch women to discuss their experiences. The panelists (Tobi Hill-Meyer, Brynn Cassidy West, Twiggy Danger, and oona fei coatl)

discussed how their gender is a site of individual and collective resistance to wider gender norms. This resistance takes the form of performing gender in ways that are associated with cisgender butch lesbians or femme trans men, or by letting their facial hair grow and binding their chests, as is often done by trans men who are taking hormones but who have not had top surgery (Hill-Meyer 2011a-b).

Since gender is seen as a product of social interaction and subject to social mediation, the ways that butch trans women “do gender” affects their status as women and their ability to pass as cisgender. In the butch trans women panel discussed above, Tobi Hill-Meyer (2011b) framed her gender performance as challenging preconceived ideas of what it means to be a trans woman, because her performance as a woman was not limited by being butch. Hill-Meyer (2011b) sees being butch as a descriptor of what she does, rather than what she does not do, and feels that a variety of different gender expressions are open to her. For example, she can wear a skirt without it detracting from her butch identity.

These different gender expressions show that passing as cisgender remains one of the most complex issues for trans women. Historically, the success of a gender transition was judged by the extent to which the individual disappeared into society; remaining a visible trans woman was seen as a gender transition failure (Denny 2006). Besides being transmisogynistic, this standard shows a lack of understanding of the diversity that exists within trans communities and the impossibility for most trans women to pass as cisgender, even if they want to. The expectation that they conform to heterosexual gender norms and become invisible leads many trans women to experiment with being highly feminine, with varying levels of success (Brown and Rounsley 1996; Haworth 2007; Pusch 2003).

Butch trans women, as well as femme trans men, struggle to respond to transphobia, transmisogyny, and femmephobia that exist within trans communities, the wider queer community, and heterosexual and cisgender society. While these forms of oppression are

similar, they describe different aspects of prejudice toward trans people and femme-identified people. Transphobia ranges from fearing trans people to outright hatred and disdain of trans people (Norton 1997; Weiss 2003); femmephobia is the disdain of femme women and all things feminine (Hill-Meyer 2008); and “transmisogyny is the hatred of trans women” in particular (Eisner 2013, 180). These different forms of oppression are evident in trans women often being seen as suffering from a mental illness and being subjected to high levels of violence.

As butch trans women cross the boundaries of gender expected of trans women, they encounter some of the same treatment that femme cisgender queer women experience in their communities. Although trans women are encouraged to be feminine in appearance, they are nonetheless more likely to be listened to if they present as androgynous or as butch at feminist and queer community events (Hill-Meyer 2012b; Serano 2013a). The participants on the butch trans women panel (2011) discussed the support they received in challenging transmisogyny and transphobia from femme queer women, as well as the support they provided to femme queer women in addressing femmephobia (Hill-Meyer 2012b). This alliance between butch trans women and cisgender queer femmes can challenge the stereotypes associated with both groups. One such stereotype held by many cisgender women is that trans women are “too loud,” talking over others and taking up “too much space” at queer women’s and feminist events, which is considered to result from the trans women continuing to possess masculine traits (Hill-Meyer 2008). This belief serves to buttress the concept that trans women are less than actual women.

Responses of Other Trans Women to Butch Trans Women

All trans women are faced with a set of narratives that seek to frame them as hyper-feminine (Brown and Rounsley 1996; Hill-Meyer 2011a). Many resist these narratives,

particularly butch trans women, and this resistance is helping to create additional possibilities for gender performance that challenge the heteronormative expectations within trans communities and the gender normative expectations within heterosexual and cisgender communities.

Some trans women continually encourage other trans women to dress femininely, while admonishing those who do not (Davy 2011; Roen 2002), creating an environment where trans women become their own worst enemy. As a trans woman in Auckland, New Zealand, I felt pressured by other trans women to become the ideal hyper-feminine woman. For example, I was told by another trans woman not to wear a particular coat, even though it was a woman's coat, because the other woman felt that the coat was nonetheless unfeminine, and therefore would undermine my gender presentation as a woman. This policing of other people's gender presentations punishes trans women who are unable or unwilling to be sufficiently feminine. The result is that trans women are placed in a double bind: if they present as traditionally feminine, they are viewed as parodies of women, and if they do not, they are not "really" women (Taylor 2013). This no-win situation frames being trans as either trying to forget that one are trans or as remaining trans and being considered the monstrous other, demanding to be recognized as human (Stryker 2006).

Response of Cisgender Lesbians and Lesbian Communities to Butch Trans Women

Cisgender lesbians and lesbian communities often view butch lesbian trans women with some confusion, as it is assumed that all trans women will be feminine and that trans women will destabilize lesbian communities. The response to trans women has been and continues to be varied and complex, with some sections of the lesbian community valuing and accepting trans women and other parts wanting nothing to do with them. Organized resistance to the inclusion of trans women in lesbian communities has its origins in the 1970s,

fuelled by three major events: the expulsion of Beth Elliott from the lesbian organization, the Daughters of Bilitis, in 1972; the campaign that led to Sandy Stone leaving the women's music label Olivia Records in 1977; and the publication of Janice Raymond's (1994) attack on trans women, *The Transsexual Empire* (Stryker 2008). These events set in motion ongoing resistance from trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), which led, most famously, to the exclusion of trans women from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and the creation of Camp Trans to protest this exclusion. The continued opposition to trans women today by TERFs is reflected in the publication of Sheila Jeffreys' (2014) book *Gender Hurts*, a self-described feminist examination of "the harms created by the ideology and practice of transgenderism" (p. 1). Jeffreys and her followers reinforce the perception that trans women are a clear and present danger to the existence of lesbian feminist communities.

As a result of such opposition, butch trans women struggle to find acceptance within many predominantly cisgender lesbian communities. They, along with other trans women, are often viewed with suspicion by such communities, due in part to being considered to possess "masculine energy." This phrase is based on the belief that trans women are inherently male and that their maleness will ruin lesbian spaces. It is used by some lesbians to justify their exclusion of trans women from participating in the lesbian community.

Even when trans women are included in lesbian spaces, elements of these issues can remain. In my own experience, I have been accepted as a staple member and group organizer of my local lesbian community. Yet I am still seen as an outsider and subjected to a certain amount of misgendering, especially with respect to pronouns.

These issues are especially complicated when a butch trans woman and a cisgender woman enter a relationship. While the lesbian partners of trans women see them as women, both parties are subject to narratives that question their sexual orientation and choice of partner, stemming from the trope that trans women are really heterosexual men seeking to enter lesbian communities or

that they are less authentic than cisgender women (Thompson 2013). In addition, these relationships are often framed within a butch/femme dynamic, and it is assumed that the trans woman is the femme partner within the relationship (Hill-Meyer 2011a).

The nature of a trans-cis lesbian relationship exposes the cisgender partner to scepticism from both trans and predominantly cisgender lesbian communities. Trans communities may view the cisgender partner of a trans woman as a “tranny chaser,”¹ while cisgender lesbians may view a queer woman partner of a trans woman as a closeted heterosexual (Serano 2013b). These relationships are thus often framed as heterosexual, with the cisgender partner finding their identity and sexual orientation being called into question. To a large degree, both the trans partner and the cisgender partner are viewed as outsiders within the other’s community.

Tashlin (2013) and Thompson (2013) write about their experiences in relationships with trans women, including being classified by some previous trans partners as a “bad partner” or “chaser.” The concept of a “bad partner/chaser” frames partners as engaging in a relationship with a trans woman only because they are sexually aroused by the idea of such a relationship. This marginalization also frames partners as “fair weather” allies, who will be around only when times are good and disappear during instances of transphobia.

Conflicting views of sexual orientation mean that the butch trans woman and her cisgender female partner are often simultaneously considered to be in a different-sex and a same-sex relationship. Raskoff (2014, n.p.) writes that “sexual orientation as a concept is not useful when applied to various trans categories. If someone is born with a body categorized as male yet identifies as a female woman and lives her life as a woman, is she a lesbian if she loves another woman? Is she gay if she loves a man? If she has sex reassignment surgery,

¹ The term “tranny chaser” usually refers to cisgender men, but it can also include cis women who have sexual relationships with trans women but do not want to be seen in public with them.

does that change anything?” These questions demonstrate the futility of trying to define and assign sexual orientations irrespective of the gender identity of the trans person involved.

Sexual orientation is also complicated for both butch trans women and their cisgender lesbian partners by how the bodies of trans women are often seen as incomprehensible. Eisner (2013, p. 250) argues that trans women are generally “considered unattractive because their bodies are unintelligible in terms of sexual attraction” by both cisgender men and women. For butch trans women then, finding a lesbian partner becomes a complicated and challenging task, with many prospective partners unsure of what a relationship with a trans woman would mean for them and their community.

Through my participant observation of the Auckland trans community, I found that cisgender lesbians in relationships with trans women struggled with how their sexual orientation was perceived by friends and family. One particular cisgender woman disclosed how her family assumed that she was now heterosexual, since she was in a relationship with a pre-sex reassignment surgery trans woman. This mindset considers lesbian trans women, especially butch trans women, to be heterosexual, as their genitals, whether a neo-vagina or a penis, are regarded as the defining aspect of their identity. My own experience as a butch trans woman in the lesbian community also demonstrates this point. Even after I had sex reassignment surgery, my lesbian partners still struggled with the idea that I might have some vestige male genitalia that they might have to touch. This notion, which was perhaps the result of not knowing what is involved in vaginoplasty surgery or how my vagina might respond when we had sexual intercourse, was an impediment in these relationships.

Conclusion

Examining butch trans women and how they frame their identities within the wider trans and lesbian communities raises a number of issues that affect the inclusion of trans

women within primarily cis lesbian community spaces, as well as their relationships with cis lesbians. The rich diversity of gender presentations within the trans community allows one to glimpse the ways that trans women in general and butch trans women in particular engage with trans and lesbian communities. The idea of community is complicated by a number of competing narratives that create ideological subgroups that seek to define what it means to be trans. Into this maelstrom of narratives, there are commonalities concerning the ways that gender performance is perceived and enacted. Additionally, the cisgender partners of trans lesbians can provide insights into the dynamics that are in operation within trans communities, even as cisgender partners are sometimes viewed with suspicion and concern by other trans people. Yet, for all the conflicts that exist within trans communities, this research suggests that the gender performance of trans women is vibrant and diverse.

The lived experiences of butch trans women show that they are active agents within their social world, while also being subjected to a number of narratives that both support and dismiss their gender performance. It is suggestive that, for most trans women, gender performance is strongly linked to meeting heterosexual and cisgender social norms. Thus studying butch trans women is important in order to understand emerging trans communities that can challenge such norms.

A number of opportunities for future research on trans people, especially butch trans women, have become apparent in the course of writing this article. Trans communities are inherently diverse, with a wide range of races, ethnicities, social classes, ages, religions, physical and mental abilities, etc. There is a need to examine how these other identities influence gender expression, sexual identity, and acceptance within trans and cis lesbian communities. There is also a need to undertake more extensive research on how butch trans women engage with larger lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities, particularly around the acceptance of butch trans women in lesbian communities.

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